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# Opportunities for Enhancing the Australian National Road Safety Strategy

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## Introduction

With the current *National Road Safety Strategy* [1] coming to the end of its term, it is timely to consider ways in which the next iteration of this strategy can be enhanced. Strategic planning should be a cyclic process in which learning and adaptation are just as important as planning and implementation. It will always be the case that some actions are not as effective as expected, or that barriers to effective implementation will emerge. Rather than being setbacks, these are opportunities for learning about the validity of our assumptions. They are also opportunities for us to adapt to meet unanticipated or emerging challenges. One of the positive aspects of the implementation of the first and second National Road Safety Strategies has been the willingness of road safety agencies to critically assess progress and to identify where and how actions would be better focused. This has been reflected in the evolving nature of the periodic National Road Safety Action Plans.

As the decade of the current Strategy reaches an end, there is a need to take this process further, and undertake a thorough critical evaluation of the Strategy development and implementation. While not an attempt to be exhaustive, the following article will identify some key priorities for consideration as part of this process.

## The role of strategies and the need for a guiding vision

Inevitably, the success of road safety strategies tends to be judged by the number of actions implemented and/or the extent to which crash reduction targets are achieved. However, it is important that such strategies do not merely become a collection of actions and targets. Johnston [2] has argued that to be effective road safety strategies need to address the often competing demands of the transport system. For example, the ongoing need for enhanced mobility, social justice and environmental sustainability may give rise to potential actions which can have a negative impact on road safety, such as calls for higher speed limits or fewer restrictions on road users. Hence, a road safety strategy needs to clearly identify the safety goals of the transport system relative to other outcomes, in order to promote coherent and consistent decision-making.

Johnston [2] argues that to do this, road safety strategies require a *guiding vision* which among other things:

- identifies what the ‘core’ safety goals are for the future;

- acknowledges the potential trade-offs that may need to be made between the competing demands of the transport system;
- provides a foundation for the guiding principles and objectives within the strategy; and
- identifies areas of accountability (particularly at the system-wide level).

Over recent years, a number of potential *guiding visions* have emerged from other countries including Sweden's *Vision Zero* [3, 4] and the Dutch *Sustainable Road Safety* [5]. Similarly, the concept of *danger reduction* has been promoted by some as a vision for enhancing the safety and legitimacy of non-motorised road users [6]. It is beyond the scope of this paper to critique these different guiding visions. However, a key common feature appears to be the way in which these guiding visions encapsulate and communicate the core safety goals of the system, even if they are aspirational in nature [7] and the need for system-wide action to achieve these goals.

While the current *National Road Safety Strategy* does not explicitly state a guiding vision, it does include the following statement: “. . . all safety measures that can be justified in terms of overall community benefits should be implemented” [1, p.3]. However, the strategy does not specify how these community benefits should be measured or assessed against the other goals of the transport system. This lack of a clear guiding vision was somewhat addressed by the adoption of the *Safety Systems Framework* in the *National Road Safety Action Plan 2005 – 2006* [8]. This framework has placed a greater emphasis on the need for governments to strive for an overall safe road transport system and given greater focus to the need to better manage system-wide vehicle speeds. However, a more explicit guiding vision is arguably required in the next National Road Safety Strategy.

## Target setting

The process for setting targets is always fraught, as there is a tension between taking account of what we can control versus what we cannot, and whether to set 'comfortable' versus ambitious targets. More particularly, a number of developments over recent year have highlighted the challenges involved in setting ambitious targets.

Firstly, the slowing rate of road fatality reductions in Australia has made it unlikely that the 5.6 deaths per 100,000 population target specified in the current strategy will be achieved. As acknowledged in the *National Road Safety Action Plan 2009 and 2010*: “The average reduction achieved since the commencement of the NRSS has been 3.5 per cent per year. These figures suggest that reaching the target now presents a formidable challenge” [9, p.13].

Secondly, it is inevitable that some jurisdictions or regions may face particular road safety challenges which will make it difficult to achieve ambitious targets in a uniform way. A good example of this relates to the major increase in motorcycle use that has occurred in Queensland over recent years, which has placed pressure on the state's road toll and seen the proportion of fatalities represented by this road user group rise from around 10% in 2000 to over 20% in recent years.

Finally, it has been known for a long time that fluctuations in the economic cycle affect road safety by influencing levels of demand for travel (both work-related and

recreational) and other activities which influence road safety, such as alcohol consumption. While it is possible to predict that swings in the cycle will occur, their amplitude and timing are not known with precision, and hence cannot easily be accommodated in the target-setting process. Also, it is difficult to predict how governments will respond to economic downturns and how effective their actions will be. Indeed, recent experience suggests that economic stimulus packages may mitigate the impact of downturns on travel demand and hence safety outcomes.

Together, these three factors may serve to discourage some decision-makers from setting ambitious targets in the future. This would be unfortunate, since a recent review of international best practice suggests that a results focus is critical to effective road safety programs and that this “*requires setting targets and identifying the institutional means and interventions to achieve them*” [7, p. 13]. More specifically, this review suggests that robust interim targets are necessary to complement more ambitious long term goals.

### **The need to widen the scope of data sources and related targets**

As acknowledged in the current Strategy, it would be desirable to have a target for road injuries, as well as fatalities. Indeed, it is unclear whether significant progress has been made towards reducing road injuries over the last decade. One important barrier to target setting in this area is the reliance of transport agencies on police data rather than health data; another barrier is the difficulty of linking data and underreporting in both systems. If it is not possible to set an injury target for the next Strategy, then at the least an action should be included which ensures that it will become possible during the life of the Strategy.

The use of data sources other than police reported crashes has a wider relevance. If we solely rely on data derived from crashes reported to police, we are systematically devaluing some road users, and arguably selling short the notion of a Safe System. This omission is clearest where pedestrians are concerned, as the only reportable crashes are those which result in collisions with a vehicle. From a transport planning perspective, walking trips are a part of the overall transport system, both in their own right and because they provide connectivity between other modes of transport. The infrastructure for walking is provided and maintained by the same agencies that provide and maintain infrastructure for motorised vehicles and cyclists, yet the trips and falls which results from poorly maintained or absent pedestrian infrastructure are not included in our approach to road safety. This is especially important as the population ages; greater numbers of older drivers will give up driving (voluntarily or involuntarily) and walk to public transport stops. The greater fragility of older people makes them vulnerable to falls – a hip fracture can be fatal – so that the benefits of reducing driving by “unfit” older people may be reduced or even overtaken by the costs of falls due to increased pedestrian activity [10]. Similar arguments apply to other crashes currently ruled out by the requirement for police reportability, e.g. at locations which do not meet the classification of a “road”.

Should such a step be taken (widening the scope of road use), it begs the question as to how the setting of targets would be affected. It is suggested that the fatality target could continue to use the police-reported data, while acknowledging that a Safe System has other indicators of safety which can be addressed.

## Links to other Strategies

Inevitably, road safety competes for public and media attention with other health, social and environmental issues of concern. In this regard, it is important that road safety doesn't become too insular and fail to capitalise on other 'moods for change' within the community. For example, environmental concerns associated with climate change provide an opportunity for road safety agencies to promote the benefits of lower vehicle speeds, which will not only enhance safety but reduce vehicle emissions. While this is somewhat of a simplistic example, it illustrates the synergistic effects that could be achieved by linking road safety improvements to other contemporary issues of concern. Hence, it is essential that the next National Road Safety Strategy is not a stand-alone document, which only has relevance to those in the field. Rather, wherever possible it needs to acknowledge and address the goals inherent in other transport, health and environmental strategies.

## Conclusion

Over the last two decades, Australia has experienced major improvements in road safety. The first and second National Road Safety Strategies have arguably played a key role in achieving these improvements, by harnessing and directing our efforts at both the national and state level. However, road safety improvements appear to be plateauing and a concerted effort is required to make further gains. There is no simple solution to this problem. It requires a coordinated and integrated approach, involving the adoption of a long-term ambitious goal for road safety, the development of ambitious but robust interim targets, and an increased investment in road safety improvements. The next National Road Safety Strategy represents the ideal vehicle by which to articulate, communicate and plan these improvements.

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